

April 2017

ATG Interviews Charles Watkinson, Associate University Librarian for Publishing and Director of the University of Michigan Press

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Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina and Gilson, Tom (2017) "ATG Interviews Charles Watkinson, Associate University Librarian for Publishing and Director of the University of Michigan Press," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 2, Article 54.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7753>

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Associate University Librarian for Publishing and Director of the University of Michigan Press

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *Charles, an outsider might think that publishing efforts at the University of Michigan are somewhat complex. Can you explain the relationship between the University of Michigan Library, Michigan Publishing and the University of Michigan Press?*

CW: It does seem complex, but it's best to think of **Michigan Publishing** as the publishing division of the **University of Michigan Library**, parallel to more familiarly-named library divisions such as Research, Collections, Learning and Teaching, Budget and Planning, Information Technology, Health Sciences, and Operations. Each division is headed by an Associate University Librarian (AUL) and these individuals constitute the leadership team; the Executive Council is chaired by the Dean of Libraries. What is unique and exciting about this structure is that it treats publishing as an integral and assumed part of "what libraries do," parallel and equal to more traditional functions.

Michigan Publishing itself is divided into three brands which serve different segments of authors with distinctively different needs: **University of Michigan Press** is a formal publisher of books in humanities and social science fields aligned with the University's strengths (e.g., classical studies, political science, performing arts); **Michigan Publishing Services** focuses on serving the institution's faculty and students, creating "white-labeled" products ranging from niche open access journals to complex digital databases; **Deep Blue** provides a self-publishing platform built on institutional repository architecture. We like to say that through these different entities **Michigan Publishing** "engages with a continuum of publishing needs."

ATG: *From your perspective, what is the strongest argument for an academic library providing publishing services? What would you advise a library that is considering the possibility of establishing such services? What budgetary and personnel commitments are necessary?*

CW: As libraries move from being primarily stewards of content to also being providers of services librarians increasingly engage with faculty and students at points when they are acting as *authors* as well as *users* of scholarly information. We know that when researchers are *creating* materials they have different needs and attitudes from when they are *consuming* them; to such a degree that **Michael Mabe** and **Mayur Amin** have referred to this as a "Dr. Jekyll and Dr. Hyde" phenomenon. There is no better way for academic libraries to think about new ways of working with faculty and students who are wearing their "author" hats

than to adopt the stance of a publisher, and libraries who are providing publishing services (and/or research data services) find that those experiences help them engage their institution's communities in new and relevant ways.

On a more practical level, I would advise a library that is considering starting a publishing services operation to first conduct an inventory of current publishing activities on campus, then identify and respond to the priority needs they identify at their own institution. I think that they'll find it amazing how many units are engaged in publishing and are looking for help to transition from print to digital. At Michigan we conducted such a study last year and found that 98 campus units were producing substantial research publications. In many cases what is being produced is gray literature (e.g., tech reports, white papers, small conference proceedings, student journals) and the library is well placed to provide identifiers, indexing, and a stable platform with little extra investment. The average staffing reported in the latest *Library Publishing Directory* is 2.1 FTE and a lot of the capacity and infrastructure needed for this style of informal publishing has already been established by any library running an institutional repository.

ATG: *With the many challenges facing university presses some have questioned their future viability. What do you say? What should be the relationship between university presses and library publishing services?*

CW: There are around 100 U.S. university presses and 2,500 four year institutions so there is space for a number of different mission-driven publishing entities. I very much see university presses and library publishing services as complementary: On the one hand, library publishers provide solutions for the sorts of lightly-reviewed, institutionally-focused, deep-niche publications that it would be challenging for a university press's brand and finances to engage with. On the other hand, university presses serve the needs of many scholars, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, for resource-intensive, highly-selective books and journals that library publishers do not generally have the bandwidth, experience, or systems to engage with satisfactorily.

Complementary need not be separate. It is exciting to see an increasing number of university presses working with libraries to establish publishing services for their campuses, revealing a valuable revenue stream in the process. **Michigan** was an early leader in such an approach, but organizations such as **University of North Carolina Press**, **University of Hawaii Press**, **Cornell University**

Press, **Temple University Press**, **Purdue University Press**, and even behemoths such as **Cambridge University Press** are doing very interesting things in the library/press collaboration space.

It is true that the financial pressures on university presses continue to be intense. Monograph revenue continues to trend remorselessly downward even as usage increases and textbooks are also coming under intense pressure. Partnering with the library may not only unearth potential income but also aligns the press more closely with the institution, creating value for constituents around the university in ways that are measurable not solely in financial terms. A truly open-minded collaboration between a library and a press has advantages for both partners. For example, it infuses the library with new expertise in working with faculty as authors and brings the press into an environment where digital innovation is possible and supported.

ATG: *Exactly what is an open access monograph and is it a financially viable model? Are there examples of successful models you can point to? Isn't institutional support necessary?*

CW: Like most things in the world of open access, what constitutes an open access monograph depends on who you talk to. It can be simply an electronic facsimile of a print book made available as a PDF with free viewing allowed but little provision for reuse. Because it is free to read, this book may well get more attention than one that is sold, but this model doesn't truly take advantage of the affordances of digital scholarship. More exciting are the long-form, open access publications which leverage liberal terms around reuse and the power of the network to facilitate new ways of reading and interacting with content. Publications appearing on new platforms such as the **University of Minnesota Press's** *Manifold Scholarship* and **University of Michigan Press's** *Fulcrum* are starting to show the potential.

Both the simple and complex versions are made possible through business models that don't rely on a purchase to gain access, but the exact mechanism of support comes in multiple forms. At **University of Michigan Press** we employ three funding models to publish open access books — the first based on subsidizing the costs of free-to-read online versions through the sale of print and downloadable eBook versions (digitalculturebooks.org); a second funded through pledges from libraries (*Knowledge Unlatched*); and a third based on

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subventions obtained by authors from their parent institutions or foundations. Models that appear to be financially viable (e.g., Luminos at **University of California Press** or **Open Book Publishers** in Cambridge) generally rely on a mix of such different funding sources. I'm most skeptical of the "freemium" model because it would only take a change in reading behavior or a killer app that made online reading a pleasure to completely undermine our ability to sell free content in premium editions.

In the U.S., where central governmental support is now weaker than it has ever been, institutional funding is to a greater or lesser degree behind most open access books. Such funding may be disbursed through libraries, often acting together, or through the deans of colleges. One of the most potentially transformative ideas is based around parent institutions supporting the publishing costs of their faculty members in return for the creation of an open access version of their book. This is an initiative of the **Association for American Universities**, the **Association of Research Libraries**, and the **Association of American University Presses**. Even if it doesn't gain enough traction in its current form, I think the conversation has inspired a number of institutions to individually experiment with making funds available to their faculty book authors.

ATG: *What do you think are the most effective methods of measuring the impact of open access publications? What measurements are employed by the University of Michigan Press?*

CW: Most stories about the impact of open access publications report download counts and views, often comparing their high numbers favorably to library circulation figures. These comparisons are rhetorically exciting but flawed because of how they compare apples to oranges. To me, downloads are only really interesting when one compares the numbers for open-access books with the numbers for comparable closed-access books on the same platform, as we are now able to do with **University of Michigan Press** titles on JSTOR. In the last quarter of 2016, for example, our OA books on JSTOR were downloaded 65 times more than their conventional cousins and viewed 127 times more.

Most effective, however, are the measures that can tell a story aligned with the ambitions of the authors and publishers who chose an open access strategy. Was the aim to reach international scholars in developing countries who could not otherwise afford the work? The geographical spread of usage revealed through Google Analytics is informative. Perhaps an open access strategy was designed to engage public policy makers? Mentions in policy documents, advocacy blogs, and specialist newsletters tracked by a tool such as *Altmetric.com* are helpful in this case. It's clear that a lot of the measures of the impact of open access monographs are qualitative in nature.

The reality is that at **University of Michigan Press** we're still exploring the best way of providing useful indicators of open access engagement to our authors. Data comes in a variety of forms from a range of sources and quite a bit of work is needed to aggregate, normalize, and communicate what it tells us. **Lucy Montgomery**, the director of research at **Knowledge Unlatched**, is doing particularly interesting work in this space.

ATG: *The discovery of open access publications is viewed as a problem. How can we improve the discoverability of OA books? What about OA journals? What role should the library play in this effort?*

CW: Libraries have a huge role to play in ensuring that open access materials of all sorts (open journals, open textbooks, open monographs) are treated on an equal footing with licensed and bought resources. There is little financial incentive for vendors whose business models are based around taking a portion of the purchase price to advertise the availability of open access titles so both OA books and journals tend to fall outside of regular acquisition work flows. One way libraries can help is in ensuring that content in respectable directories of open access content such as the *Directory of Open Access Books* or *Directory of Open Access Journals* gets ingested into the OPAC. But I worry that treating OA content in a siloed way will perpetuate faculty perceptions of a two-tier publication system, with open access materials separate from, and less worthy than, for fee resources. I hope, therefore, that libraries will consider paying convenience fees to vendor partners such as **Coutts** or **YBP** to ensure that enriched catalog records are provided by them for open access titles.

My colleague **Becky Welzenbach** is leading a project funded by the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** entitled "Mapping the Free Ebook Supply Chain" which is exploring how users find, get, and use open access books. **University of Michigan Press** and **Open Book Publishers** are collaborating on this study. It is clear from the analyses which technical lead **Eric Hellman** is doing that most of our open access books are found through the open web and not through library catalogs. More inclusion of these books in libraries is essential to ensure that these materials get the respect they deserve and to keep libraries relevant in this changing landscape.

ATG: *You recently announced the launch of a new publishing platform called Fulcrum. Can you tell us about that? Did the University of Michigan develop it? Did it arise from a desire to increase discoverability of specific types of resources that you thought were underserved?*

CW: *Fulcrum* (<https://www.fulcrum.org>) is one of several publishing platform projects being supported by the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** as part of a general push to "make digital scholarship safe for humanists." Other notable projects are at **University of Minnesota Press**, **New York University Press**, **Stanford University Press**, **Yale University Press**, the **University of West Virginia**, and **Project Muse**. Each of the projects has a slightly dif-

ferent focus and together they respond to the variety of needs that scholars describe as they create works that move beyond the traditional container of "the book."

University of Michigan Press is especially well-known for its publications in media-rich fields such as theater, music, film, and archaeology. Therefore our focus with *Fulcrum* was on the needs of authors who wished to present multimedia files alongside their texts in a way that allowed readers to move easily between narrative and associated data. A specific challenge these authors shared with us was around preservation, especially since the types of digital files they are producing are becoming increasingly complex (e.g., 3D models, GIS maps). Being part of a research library we therefore decided to build *Fulcrum* within the **Hydra/Fedora** open source framework that many academic libraries are using to build tools such as data repositories. This allows authors to take advantage of library-grade preservation infrastructure while getting publisher-services at the front end. My colleague **Becky Welzenbach** sometimes visualizes *Fulcrum* as a mullet hairstyle: "press at the front, library at the back." While **Michigan** has taken the lead we've benefitted from great collaboration with the presses and libraries at **Indiana**, **Minnesota**, **Northwestern**, and **Penn State**.

We're now working with **Lyrasis** to develop a hosted version of *Fulcrum* for other publishers, especially those connected to their libraries, to use and are releasing the open source code to the **Hydra** community as we go. While the idea of a publisher our size running its own platform may seem ludicrous in a period where there is a move toward scale (e.g., **Wiley** acquiring **Atypon**, **HighWire** merging with **Semantico**), this is an area where being part of a library with a great deal of experience in building technology helps level the playing field. With *Fulcrum* we believe we can offer some unique opportunities to our authors and those of like-minded presses that will give us a competitive advantage in competing for the best scholarship. We're currently working to move the awesome **ACLS Humanities Ebook** collection (<http://humanitiesebook.org/>) onto *Fulcrum* and also develop the first publications of the **Lever Press**, the innovative born-digital, platinum open access imprint created by over 50 liberal arts colleges in collaboration with **Amherst College Press** and **Michigan Publishing**.

ATG: *What's the percentage of OA books to OA journals at Michigan University Press? How about industry wide?*

CW: In 2016 15% of **University of Michigan Press** books were published open access and we now make over 850 of our titles freely available, including a lot of backlist books via **HathiTrust**. While **University of Michigan Press** doesn't publish periodicals, **Michigan Publishing Services** does support around 40 open access journals. As a library publishing enterprise, **MPS** views it as a mission-related activity to give important journals who may not have great commercial appeal an inexpensive publishing option.

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Thinking about the situation in the industry more widely, the estimates of the current status and growth of open access globally vary widely, depending on the boundaries one draws around what constitutes “true” open access and what does not. Some commentators are suggesting that open access for journals has reached a tipping point, but I would be surprised if open access books ever constituted the majority of monographs published. There would need to be a substantial change in government policies or institutional funding priorities to make this so and we’re not seeing a surge of federal support for the humanities in the U.S. right now. Even if OA monograph publishing remains a minority activity, however, I do think this is an important sector of publishing activity with many opportunities to extend the reach and impact of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

ATG: *What do you see as the future of the institutional repository? Should it always be part of the library? Or are there other viable models? How is it handled at the University of Michigan?*

CW: I think that the most promising future for IRs is as publishing platforms for the sorts of original content produced by faculty and students that tend to otherwise not be able to fully participate in the digital environment. That includes research data from interdisciplinary and small science projects, gray literature, and electronic theses and dissertations. At **University of Michigan** this kind of content accounts for only one third of the 100,000 objects in **Deep Blue**, but a disproportionate percentage of the almost 10 million downloads annually come from this unique material. Because they are expert in the description of information to ensure discoverability, committed to stability and preservation, and embedded in the community that produces these materials, librarians are ideally placed to provide repository services.

On the other hand, an IR will only truly achieve its potential as the hub for its parent institution’s scholarly output if it is integrally linked with other elements in the university’s research infrastructure. These increasingly include a Research Information Management (RIM) system run by the Office of Research or an academic center for data science. Through such relationships it can provide services that faculty members really need, such as assisting them in depositing publications and data to comply with funder mandates. And it is differentiated from the many other types of government repositories, disciplinary repositories, and generalized commercial services available.

ATG: *One of the traditional roles for the university press was to support humanities scholarship. As revenues decline, can university presses still be called upon to support the humanities? If so, how?*

CW: The irony of university presses is that the books and journals they publish have never been as well-used or have had greater reach than today. The dominant library narrative a

few years ago focused on the low circulation of academic print books in library collections. Now that university press monographs have more fully entered the digital environment, I’m hearing of comparable if not greater use of book chapters than of journal articles through aggregations such as **Project Muse** and **JSTOR**. The problem is that the business models under which titles are exposed in eBook aggregations are providing nothing like the returns that presses used to receive from print sales, and the costs of producing the high quality, labor intensive work that scholars demand from university presses remain high. We are seeing an average gap of around \$10,000 between three-year revenue and the fully-loaded direct costs of production for our specialist monographs.

In an environment where the support from library acquisitions budgets for books and non-STEM journals is decreasing there is indeed a need for some radical rethinking of how the publication of humanities scholarship is supported. I like **Paul Courant’s** idea of requiring the beneficiaries of university press publishing, the administrators who outsource credentialing of their faculty to publishers but don’t support a university press on their campus, to more equitably share the costs of maintaining the system. This is the attraction of the **AAU/ARL/AAUP** Subvention-Funded Digital Monograph Publishing Initiative, led by provosts and senior librarians from leading institutions, that proposes that parent institutions should substantially bear the costs of publishing the book-length works that their faculty produce, in return for making them available in open access formats. This would certainly lead to a more sustainable system and would benefit faculty members in terms of increased reach and impact of their work. Whether institutions who are used to acting in their own self-interests can come together for the common good remains to be seen.

ATG: *Speaking more broadly, how can libraries best support digital scholarship — in terms of space, technology, librarians’ skills?*

CW: Helping faculty and students take full advantage of technology to enrich the ways in which they approach their research questions is certainly an opportunity for librarians. We have rich collections, technological infrastructure, flexible spaces, and people with a diversity of expertise to assist the scholars who find their way to our services. Many libraries have focused on supporting the earlier phases of the research life-cycle, especially for digital humanists, and there is a lot of innovation around creating spaces for exploration, visualization, and collaboration full of 3D printers and immersive screens. These seem to usually be good investments, especially for drawing students into opportunities for experiential digital learning.

What’s often missing, however, are library services that can help faculty later in their research processes, at the point when they wish to commit the complex digital works they have created to the durable record of scholarship. This is where I think an initiative like **Fulcrum** can fit in because it provides a structured plat-

form for supporting and preserving complex digital works in a way that also makes them discoverable.

ATG: *Charles, if you were sitting in our place conducting this interview, what question would you ask yourself?*

CW: Especially in the context of an **Against the Grain** interview, I think I might ask “What’s it like following in the footsteps of such a famous father?” since **Anthony Watkinson** has been and continues to be such a well-known and important figure in the academic publishing industry, and such a stalwart of the **Charleston Library Conference**. The simple answer is that it is great. He has always been incredibly supportive while still giving me space to find my own way in this field. We’ve historically had the benefit of working in rather different sectors and at different scales, with one of the STEM journals he has run often earning more annually than the largest humanities publishing operation I’ve been involved in. Increasingly, however, our interests are converging around the future of the monograph and the interesting intersections between libraries and publishers. It’s one of the greatest pleasures of my year to be able to catch up with him at the **Charleston Conference** and spend time together learning about the latest trends, meeting friends old and new, and reflecting on what might come next.

ATG: *We know that your work demands a lot of time and energy so we were wondering how you maintain your edge? What do you do in your down time to re-energize and get ready for that next publishing challenge? Are there any particular activities you enjoy?*

CW: In the few months when it is not immersed in winter, Ann Arbor is a great city for parks and hiking trails and the neighboring communities have many green open spaces that we enjoy. During the colder weather, the **Matthaei Botanical Gardens** have a wonderful green house, the **Henry Ford Museum** includes an excellent collection of historic vehicles, and great Detroit museums (like the **Detroit Institute of Arts**) are only 45 minutes’ drive. Exploring these attractions with the family, and seeing them afresh through our children’s eyes, are the great pleasures of my weekends. During the week, I benefit from having an extremely nice group of colleagues whose enthusiasm and commitment gives me energy. 🌲